DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 217 327 CG 015 933

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TITLE Gender Differences in the Adjustment to Divorce.
PUB DATE Aug 81
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (89th, Los Angeles, CA, August 24-26, 1981). Best copy available.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Processes; Coping; Decision Making; *Depression (Psychology); *Divorce; *Emotional Adjustment; Etiology; *Psychological Characteristics; Self Evaluation (Individuals); *Sex Differences; Spouses

ABSTRACT

Evidence suggests that important gender differences may influence both the decision to divorce and the nature of the life crisis which is precipitated. Recently divorced male and female subjects (N=30) who were childless, between ages 25-35, and married between 2-10 years, were interviewed and completed questionnaires. Results indicated that significantly more women than men had initiated the marital break-up, and more women had filed for divorce. Significant differences were found between women and men in measures of depression and satisfaction with the decision to divorce. Level of depression was significantly correlated with attributions of self-blame among men, but not among women. The findings suggest the existence of subtypes of depression which may differ between women and men. (Author/KMF)

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Gender Differences in the Adjustment to Divorce

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Presented as part of a poster session at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Los Angeles, California, September, 1981.

This study is based on portions of a master's thesis entitled "Depression, Gender, and Attributions of Blame in the Resolution of the Divorce Experience," done under the direction of Bonnie R. Strickland, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology and Departmental Chair, Department of Psychology, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA.

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Introduction. The experience of divorce constitutes an increasingly prevalent contemporary life crisis in which issues of separation and loss in adulthood are of paramount concern. The period precipitated by marital separation has been characterized as a time of emotional turbulence which is likely to include some degree of depression (Weiss, 1975; Kressel, Lopez-Morillas, Weinglass & Deutsch, 1979). Recent evidence suggests that women and men may hold different expectations for their marital relationships, and may attribute responsibility for marital conflict differently as well (Bernard, 1971; Harvey, Wells & Alvarez, 1976; Brown & Fox, 1979). In light of such evidence, it seems reasonable to predict that there may be important gender differences which influence both the decision to divorce and the nature of the life crisis which is thereby precipitated.

This study investigated several aspects of the divorce experience. While largely exploratory in nature, specific hypotheses pertaining to gender differences in the decision to divorce, as well as to cognitive and emotional aspects of the post-divorce adjustment, were investigated.

Hypotheses.

1. During the divorce crisis, women would exhibit higher levels of depression than men. It was not expected that this difference would endure over time;

2. Cognitive factors, operationally defined in terms of attributions of self-blame for the divorce, would be significantly correlated with level of depression;

3. More women than men would be the "leavers" in their marital break-up.

Method.

Subjects. Participants were selected from a large pool of divorce records available at two county courthouses in a Northeastern state. Selection criteria were designed to assure a reasonably homogeneous group of subjects for whom the impact of divorce would not be complicated by single-parent issues or custody arrangements. Therefore, only divorced individuals who did not have children, who were between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five, and who had been married between two and ten years were recruited by letter. These individuals had been divorced within the previous two years. Only one member from each divorced pair was included for study. This procedure yielded fifteen female and fifteen male subjects.

Procedure. Each subject participated in an individual, two-hour interview comprised of open-ended questions and written questionnaires. These were designed to assess current functioning, to obtain retrospective accounts of the divorce crisis, and to gather demographic information. The Self-Rating Depression Scale (SDS) was employed as a measure of

depression (Zung, 1965). Attributions of blame were measured on 11-point Likert scales.

Results.

1. Female and male subjects were matched on a number of demographic variables, with the exception that male subjects reported a significantly higher level of annual income ($\underline{t}_{(28)}=1.8$, $p<.05$).

2. Females reported significantly higher levels of depression than males in their retrospective accounts of the divorce crisis, as measured by the SDS ($\underline{t}_{(28)}=-2.1$, $p<.04$). Significantly more women than men reported that this "Worst Period" had occurred prior to the actual separation ($x^2_{(1)}=2.72$, $p<.05$). No differences were found between these groups in "Present" SDS scores ($\underline{t}_{(28)}=-.22$, $p<.8$).

3. No differences were found between female and male subjects in mean ratings of satisfaction with the decision to divorce; men, however, displayed significantly greater variability ($F_{14:14}=2.58$, $p<.05$).

4. SDS depression scores were significantly correlated with three measures of self-blame among males ($r_1=.49$, $p<.03$; $r_2=.49$, $p<.03$; $r_3=.58$, $p<.01$), but not among females ($r_1=.15$, $p<.30$; $r_2=.30$, $p<.14$; $r_3=.07$, $p<.4$).

5. Significantly more women than men had initiated the break-up ($x^2_{(1)}=5.4$, $p<.02$), and more women had filed for divorce ($x^2_{(1)}=3.58$, $p<.06$).

Discussion. The present findings support the hypothesis that there are important gender differences which influence the experience of divorce. Moreover, findings also suggest that the onset of depression does not, in and of itself, constitute ineffective coping. On the contrary, although females reported significantly greater depression during the divorce crisis, they had also taken a more active role in ending their relationships. Additionally, they did not exhibit significantly

greater "Present" SDS scores than males, and also expressed more consistent satisfaction with the decision to divorce. The finding of significant correlations between self-blame and SDS scores among males only is consistent with the cultural stereotype, and suggests that depression may involve a qualitatively different set of experiences for women than for men (cf. Chevron, Quinlan & Blatt, 1978).

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